



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A NEGRO COLONIZATION PROJECT IN MEXICO, 1895

The Negro question touched the relations of the United States and Mexico at several points. For instance, the escape of runaway slaves into Mexico where slavery was legally forbidden, was a factor in causing disturbances along the Rio Grande between 1850 and 1860.¹ Again, during the following decade when the colonization of the freedmen became a vital issue, there was at least one proposal to settle them on the border between the United States and Mexico. It was urged that a strip of land extending from the Rio Grande to the Colorado and westward to the mountains of New Mexico be set apart by the national government for this purpose. On January 11, 1864, Honorable James H. Lane of Kansas actually introduced a bill looking to this end, which received favorable consideration from the Committee on Territories, but so far as has been ascertained never came to a vote in Congress.²

In support of his proposal Lane urged, among other things, that the colonization of the Negroes on this frontier would prove beneficial to Mexico and tend to promote friendship between that country and the United States. "We can thus plant at the door of Mexico," he said, "four million good citizens, who can step in at any time, when invited, to strengthen the hands of that Republic."³ In similar vein the territorial committee, of which Lane was chairman, declared: "It is desirable to cultivate friendly relations with the people of Mexico. It is known to us that among that people there are no prejudices against the black

¹ For a brief discussion of these disorders see the present writer's "Border Troubles Along the Rio Grande, 1848-1860," in *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXIII, October, 1919, pp. 91-111.

² *Sen. Jour.*, 38 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 66, *passim*.

³ *Cong. Globe*, 38 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 673.

man, and that intermarriage is not prohibited either by law or custom. . . . It is confidently believed that the colony provided for in this bill, by intermarriage with the people of those Mexican States, and friendly intercourse with them, would so Americanize them as that they would be prepared and seek an annexation to our then glorious free republic.”⁴

The project which is the subject of this paper had no official element motivating it, however. It was merely a private enterprise conducted for the profit of a Mexican land company and a member of the Negro race;⁵ and not until the scheme had failed did the United States government take a hand. On December 11, 1894, H. Ellis,⁶ a Negro, entered into a contract with the “Agricultural, Industrial, and Colonization Company of Tlahualilo, Limited,” for the transportation from the United States by February 15, 1895, of one hundred colored families between the ages of twelve and fifty. The company obligated itself to pay the passage of the colonists provided it did not exceed \$20, and after they were established upon the land, to furnish them agricultural implements, stock, seed, and housing quarters, as well as \$6 monthly during the first three months, and thereafter a sum later to be agreed upon. Each family was to be given sixty acres for cultivation, forty for cotton, fifteen for corn, and five for a garden.⁷ The company was to receive 40% of the yield of cotton and corn, the colonists 50%, and Ellis 10%. The colonists were to have two years in which to pay for their passage; but, of course, the money advanced for sustenance was to be paid from the first crop, except in the event of an extremely lean year. The entire produce of the garden was to go to the Negroes. Stores were to be established in the colony, the colonists were to have their cotton ginned at the gins

⁴ *Sen. Report* No. 8, 38 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 2.

⁵ This seems to have been only one of some three or four such undertakings attempted at the time. See *House Doc.* No. 169, 54 Cong., 1 Sess., pp. 44-45.

⁶ Elsewhere written W. H. Ellis.

⁷ Ellis's contract promised more than this in case of larger families.

of the company at the rate of \$1.50 per bale, and the company was to be given preference on all the produce sold. The contract was to endure for a period of five years.⁸

Ellis set about immediately to fulfil his agreement. Going among the Negroes of Alabama and Georgia, he issued a rather extravagant circular representing his proposition as presenting the "greatest opportunity ever offered to the colored people of the United States to go to Mexico, . . . the country of 'God and Liberty.'" He declared that the land of his company would easily produce a bale of cotton and from fifty to seventy-five bushels of corn per acre; spoke of irrigation facilities which made them independent of the rain, of "fine game, such as deer, bear, duck, and wild geese, and all manner of small game, as well as opossum," and of schools and churches to be constructed; and sought especially to impress upon their minds the fact that "the great Republic of Mexico extends to all of its citizens the same treatment—equal rights to all, special privileges to none."⁹

A number of Negroes were soon attracted by the project and early in February they were ready to set out. In fact, by the 6th a party had already arrived at the hacienda of the company, situated some thirty miles east of Mapimi, Durango, in a rather "wild and inaccessible place" several miles from a railway. On the 25th of the same month another group of colonists put in their appearance, making a total of about 816.

It is interesting to note the section from which the Negroes came, and the size and composition of the families which they brought. Twelve of the number came from Griffin, Georgia; all the rest were from one of seven towns in Alabama; namely, Tuscaloosa, Gadsen, Williams, Eutaw, Carter, Johns, and Birmingham. Of these towns Tuscaloosa furnished by far the greater number, while Eutaw,

⁸ For the contract between Ellis and the company see *House Doc.* No. 169, 54 Cong., 1 Sess., pp. 46-48; for that between Ellis and the colonists see *ibid.*, pp. 4-5. There are only a few minor differences in the two.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Gadsen, and Birmingham came next. Only a comparatively small number came from Williams, Carter, and Johns. Instead of having some three or four members as apparently designed in the original contract, some of the families numbered six, eight, and even twelve; and the number of women and children was disproportionately large.

When the colonists arrived at the hacienda they found the ground covered with snow. They were crowded into small, leaky, adobe houses, without floors and with doors which could not be closed tightly. The remainder of the winter and the following spring proved unusually rainy and unpleasant; the food which they were given was probably of a somewhat inferior quality; and their tools were clumsy and dull. These factors possibly account for their homesickness and alleged indisposition to work. Moreover, the small number of able-bodied workingmen among them was disappointing to the colonization company. Naturally enough, mutual dissatisfaction led to quarrels and difficulties. As was to be expected, too, sickness soon visited the settlement, killing off large numbers and terrifying the rest. A sort of liver disease broke out among them in April causing several deaths, and this was followed early in July by the ravages of the smallpox.¹⁰

The first epidemic was sufficiently terrifying to cause some of the colonists to bolt their contract and attempt to return to the United States. When the smallpox broke out it proved to be too much for their sense of honor or any other restraining force. Those who were able began precipitously to desert the settlement for the United States, apparently giving no attention at all to the matter of sustenance for the journey. By the latter part of July all had left except about fifty of the most persistent and faithful who chose to stay by their crops.¹¹

The sufferings of these colonists while at Tlahualilo and

¹⁰ Dwyer's Report, and enclosures, *ibid.*, pp. 42 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 36, 42.

on their way to the Rio Grande furnished the press of the United States a sensational topic which it immediately seized upon. Indeed, the first report which reached the United States through official circles was itself sufficiently exaggerated to create excitement. On May 21, 1895, two fugitives from the colony arrived at Chihuahua City where they related stories of oppression and brutal cruelty. One of them reported that upon arriving at the colony the Negroes "found themselves in the worst form of bondage, with no hope of ever securing liberty," and that no letter informing friends of their condition and their suffering was ever permitted to reach the United States. He said he was one of a party of some fifty who had stolen away in the hope of making their escape. The other Negro declared that he was the sole survivor of a party of about forty which had likewise run away from the settlement, but had been overtaken and slain by a band of Mexican guards in the employment of the colonizing company. The consul of the United States at Chihuahua sent immediate notice of the affair to the State Department.¹²

E. C. Butler, chargé of the United States in Mexico, was immediately notified and directed to call upon the Mexican government to investigate the affair.¹³ Meantime the consular officers of the United States began an investigation of their own which tended to convince them that the extravagant rumors regarding the cruelties perpetrated against the Negroes were totally unfounded. On June 24, the consul at Piedras Negras, Jesse W. Sparks, forwarded a report which he respectfully suggested should be given to the public "in order to contradict the terrible stories of murder and bad treatment of these Negroes . . . and deter other Negroes who contemplate colonizing in Mexico." It was based upon a sworn statement made by the purported leader of the runaways, a deposition of another of the colonists, and information received through a traveller from

¹² Burke to Uhl, May 28, 1895, and enclosure, *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹³ Olney to Butler, June 17, 1895, *ibid.*, p. 5.

New York City, who claimed to have visited the colony, as well as through a civil engineer who was in the employment of the Mexican International Railroad. From the information furnished by these witnesses Sparks drew the conclusion that the Mexican colonization company had lived up to its contract, that the Negroes had not been cruelly treated while at the colony, and that the report concerning the murder of a portion of the band¹⁴ attempting to escape was absolutely false. The Mexican soldiers alleged to have slain the Negroes were in fact a relief party sent out by the company which, being acquainted with the barren and desolate nature of the country which would have to be crossed in reaching the United States, surmised that the lives of the colonists were in danger.¹⁵

Those who left the settlement after the smallpox epidemic broke out really suffered severely from lack of food. Without money and without provisions, there would have been no alternative but starvation or highway robbery, if the consular agents of the United States had not come to the rescue. That they came and came effectively is evinced by the fact that very few of the colonists actually died of starvation. One hundred and twenty-five of the Negroes arrived at Mapimi about July 19 and sent a delegation from there to Torreón to appeal to the consul for aid.¹⁶ The agent at this place wrote to the consul at Durango for advice and help, while at the same time he set about to raise funds by voluntary subscription. The consul at Durango responded immediately with financial aid and suggested that the Negroes seek employment; but the small number of the group which was able to work seemed disinclined to do so; and, to make matters worse, the smallpox continued its ravages and in a measure precluded the possibility of obtaining employment even if it had been desired.¹⁷

The consuls appealed at the same time to the authorities

¹⁴ It appears that only one band had tried to escape prior to July 18 or 19.

¹⁵ Sparks to Uhl, June 24, 1895, and enclosure, *ibid.*, pp. 6-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

at Washington who replied at first that there was no fund available for the relief of the destitute citizens. As early as July 26, however, General Bliss, who commanded the department of Texas, was ordered to send a physician to help look after the sick and to place 1500 rations into the hands of Consul Sparks at Piedras Negras; and the consul at Piedras Negras was directed, in case return to the colony was not "practicable or consistent with humane considerations," to endeavor to persuade the railroad companies to transport the Negroes to their homes under the promise of receiving remuneration as soon as Congress could be prevailed upon to make an appropriation for that purpose.¹⁸

Meantime, the demoralized colonists were leaving their crops and making their way first to Mapimi, and later to Torreón, where most of them caught the Mexican International to Eagle Pass. Here they were received in a quarantine encampment especially prepared for them and given clothes, provisions, and medical attention until the smallpox epidemic had been subdued. This required considerable time and the expense was by no means small. Finally, by September 26, those who had been taken into quarantine first were ready to leave, and on that date the Southern Pacific took aboard 167 of them destined for New Orleans, from which point they were to be transported by the Louisville and Nashville to Birmingham, Alabama. On October 4, another group boarded the train; on October 10, another; on October 22, still another; and on November 3, the last of the encampment left Eagle Pass. The last party reached New Orleans on the following day and perhaps arrived at Birmingham on the 5th.¹⁹

Thus ended the colonization scheme of Ellis and the Mexican land company. It had cost the United States Government more than twenty thousand dollars. It had cost the Tlahualilo Company about seven thousand. But the Negroes themselves had borne the greatest losses. Seventy

¹⁸ Sparks to Uhl, June 4, 1895, and enclosure, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

or more of their number had found graves on the hacienda near Mapimi, 10 had died at Torreón, 8 while *en route* from that station to Eagle Pass, and 60 in the encampment there, making a total of about 148. Besides these, there were 250 not accounted for and half as many more scattered and possibly separated for years from their friends and relatives. Only 334 left Eagle Pass by train for their homes in Alabama, while the Louisville and Nashville records show that only 326 were taken aboard at New Orleans. What fate overtook the small number who chose to remain with their crops has not been ascertained.²⁰

J. FRED RIPPY

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

²⁰ Sparks to Uhl, June 24, 1895, and enclosure, pp. 42, 65-66.

President Cleveland, in his message of December 2, 1895, urged an appropriation for the reimbursements of the railroads, and on January 27, 1896, he sent a special message to Congress with reference to the matter. Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, IX, 634, 664.

An appropriation for urgent deficiencies which was passed on February 26, 1896, contained the following interesting item: "For the payment of the cost of transportation furnished by certain railway companies in connection with the failure of the scheme for the colonization of negroes in Mexico, necessitating their return to their homes in Alabama, . . . five thousand and eighty-seven dollars and nine cents." 29 *U. S. Statutes at Large*, p. 18.